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OUR OWN CHURCH

AN ADDRESS

TO THE

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRESBYTERIAL SOCIETY

OF

THE BARRIE PRESBYTERY.

BY

REV. D. D. McLEOD

SEPTEMBER, 1896.

*"There is one body and one spirit. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all,
and in you all."—Eph. iv., 4.*



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OUR OWN CHURCH.

It has been thought advisable that on this occasion, when we are uniting the young people's societies within the bounds in a Presbyterian organization, that your attention should be called to our own church. "Consider ye her palaces, and mark her bulwarks well."

Every body of spiritual people has a spiritual home. The church is the house of God and the home of His people. Our room in that house, which here on earth has "many mansions" as well as in Heaven, we call by the name of Presbyterian. We are to speak of it. We meet as a company of Presbyterians but not in any narrow spirit. The sectarian spirit is alien to us as a church. We speak of our own church, because we wish both young and old to know how worthy it is of their affection and honor. It is the church of our fathers, fathers whom we have every reason to respect. It is a church which makes its first work to preach a pure gospel with fidelity. It is the church which our judgment approves, and we are in it for good reasons. There is a wholesome atmosphere in our church. Its aim is to make our faith to be based on an intelligent grasp of divine truth, and that our religious life should be stable. Within its fold we can find ample outlet for all our enthusiasms, and all our activities. The church then which best feeds our souls life, and gives us room to work for Christ is a church in which we may be satisfied.

OUR NAME.

Our name, as you all know, has a very ancient source. It carries in it both doctrine and polity and history. Taken from the Greek word, "Presbyter," which signifies elder, it points to this office of the elder, the teaching elder and the ruling elder, as the distinctive feature of the church. The name comes to us from reformation times, but the doctrine and polity it points to, carry us back to apostolic times. Our system of church government we deduce from the New Testament. We hold it to be agreeable to and founded upon the word of God. We do not, never did, claim divine authority for all its details, yet we believe it to be in outline entirely in harmony with apostolic teaching and apostolic usage. Its present form has in substance come to us from the earliest reformation period. It has been investigated and expounded by, and commended itself to the very foremost of the reformers on the continent and in Britain. Of these Calvin and Knox are the names we know best, and these are names, than which, there are no higher in their respective spheres.

There are two features of our church which in its best developments are conspicuous, and in which, I think, among the churches it is first. These are, first, its catholicity both in spirit and doctrine. We are not narrow, we believe that the church of God is composed of all true believers of whatever name, and their children. We love all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity (Eph. vi. 24), said Dr. Duncan, "I'm first a Christian, next a Catholic, then a Calvinist, fourth a Pædobaptist, fifth a Presbyterian. I like to think of these positions as towers rising one above the other, though narrowing as they rise. The first is the broadest and is the foundation laid by Christ, but we are to

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build on that and as we ascend our outlook widens." We cherish then a friendly spirit toward all fellow christians, while at the same time we stand firm by our own convictions. The second feature I refer to is—our church's fidelity to the word of God. It subjects all teaching and all worship to the measurement of the law and the testimony. It has ever been trained in, and upheld as supreme in authority, the divine word. It has never bowed to any human authority. It has ever taught that "God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it in matters of faith and worship." In this is no doubt found the secret of the church's success. To know the word of God, and to teach it, has been her mission from the first.

OUR CONFESSION.

It is impossible in the brief time at our disposal, to do more than make some general remarks on the doctrine and polity of our church. Let me before speaking on the subject remind you of this fact, that our confession of faith, which contains the statement of our doctrine, was never by the church imposed upon, nor intended to be imposed upon her members as necessary to be received by them. The acceptance of its statement of doctrine is required of ministers and office bearers only. They are the licensed appointed teachers of the people. As such, the church must know what they are going to teach.

Their taking the position of a teacher is quite voluntary. They know what they will be expected to teach. It is therefore no infringement of their liberty to ask them to confine their teaching within the lines laid down. But you, who are only members of the church, though we hope and desire that you should receive the gospel as it is taught by our church, are not

required to do so. All that is required of you in order to be members of the church is, that you should profess your faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Redeemer, and that your life and conduct should be consistent with your profession.

OUR DOCTRINE.

1. As to our doctrine then — I would remark that it is Catholic and comprehensive. It includes the fundamental doctrines of the gospel which all evangelical churches teach.

Its teaching gathers round the three foundation truths of revelation "ruin by the Fall, redemption by the Blood of Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit." Its system of theology is commonly called Calvinistic, as Calvin has been the ablest expounder of it. Its theology is the theology of the reformation. At the same time we must remember, that Calvin and the reformers only taught the truth which after earnest study they found in the word of God. They teach us to accept no doctrine on the authority of men. We follow them only because they follow the teaching of scripture. We have kept to this theology, therefore we are at home wherever a pure gospel is preached, and with Catholic spirit we rejoice in the preaching of the gospel by others, even though in certain points we do not see eye to eye with them,

2. Our system of doctrine is a logical one. There is no saving virtue in logic. But it is a satisfaction to find, how one truth of God's word supports and, as it were, leads up to another. That we are not involved in a tangle of disconnected doctrine, but are asked to receive a statement of doctrine, which is reasonable, and which is systematic. Such a statement we find in our Shorter Catechism, in which there is a regular gradation of doctrine from the first question to the last. It carries us through the course, beginning with the purpose of man's creation, then his

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fall, the method of redemption, the work of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost in redemption, the call of the sinner to the new life. Then we have the law provided for us, and the christian ethics based on it but inspired by divine grace. This sufficiently illustrates this feature of our system. I Only point to it. It would exceed our limits to dwell on it.

3. But as we are often reminded, the distinctive feature of the doctrine of our church is the prominence which it gives to the sovereignty of God. Not only in the realm of nature but in the sphere of redemption we believe in a God of infinite grace and righteousness, who reigns supreme in Heaven and on earth.

We find the great mystery of predestination so plainly stated in scripture that we accept it. We know that God is infinitely righteous, therefore there cannot be in this predestination, any interference with human freedom or human responsibility. Standing on this high level, to which this truth of the Divine Sovereignty has ever lifted the church, keeping this in the forefront of our teaching, we rise to clearer conceptions of divine grace and of the gospel, a gospel which is not narrow or limited in its world embracing offers of mercy. In lifting up the sovereignty of God, we at the same time lift up the supremacy of conscience, of divine truth, divine worship and of all things divine. It is in this direction alone we can look for a coming together of the churches. It is in the acknowledgment of this truth they meet at last, when every crown is cast at the feet of Jesus Christ as Lord of all.

It is no empty claim that is made for our church, and for our church's teaching in former days, which has been so much spoken against, and which some of our own people seem ashamed of, that it trained up a race of men and women whose lives were distinguished for strong and noble qualities, who were a people of

reverent spirit, of patient endurance, of heroic courage, who when they entered into conflict with adverse powers, whether Kings or Popes, did not give up the battle till they had obtained the victory for themselves and for the world. Our doctrine, like the gospel itself, has been attacked from the beginning, yet it has not been in any essential part overthrown or changed. It has built up a strong church for which we have reason to thank God. For whether we regard the efficiency of the ministry, the character of the people, the contribution which she has made to the elevation of society, to its emancipation from error, to the mission work of the world, we find that our church takes a place second to no other. We should therefore study her doctrine. We should uphold her good name. We should throw all our energies into her operations. We should make it plain, so far as we can, that this church, which in every age has had in her ranks young men and maidens, who were ready to die for the testimony of Jesus Christ, has still among her members young men and women of a like spirit, ready to devote their lives to His cause.

The question of the polity of our church, or how the church is or should be governed, I can only touch upon. You all know, that from the beginning good men have differed on the subject of church government. All agree in this, that there should be order and government in the church. How that is to be secured, has divided the world. Into the wide sea of controversy connected with this subject I cannot enter. At the reformation, the leading reformers investigated this subject as earnestly as they did the doctrine of the church. They found in the New Testament the general principles on which the government of the church should proceed. They laid down a system which they believed to be "founded on and agreeable to the word of God." As I have

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said, they did not claim for every detail in the regulation of church affairs a scriptural sanction, and they taught, that the church might modify these details, as the spirit of God guided her to do, to meet the changing circumstances through which she might be called to pass. The main positions therefore of our church order are entirely scriptural. Our system is not responsible for the errors we find in blue books, or which men may indulge in, in church courts. Presbyterianism rightly administered is a reasonable orderly system, although as we see it sometimes administered it may not appear to be so.

As is always pointed out when speaking on this subject, our system contains several elements which commend it in a special manner. 1. Our church order has this excellency, that it avoids on the one hand the evils of Hierarchism, or priesly domination, which is another name for prelacy. It is preserved from, and guarded against the prelatic spirit, which is always despotic. On the other hand, it is preserved from the confusion and disorder which arise from unregulated democracy. I do not speak with disrespect of the prelatic or independent systems of government. Great and good men, and powerful churches have adopted these systems. We believe however that our own system avoids evils into which these systems have fallen, on the one side, or the other. 2. Another excellency of our system is, that it secures in an efficient manner the great principle of all righteous government, namely, the utmost liberty of, and justice to the individual, combined with, a decorous and educative order. 3. Again our system secures unity throughout the membership of the church. Our meeting to-day is intended to illustrate this feature. We are of one family, and the least member should have the power and sympathy of the whole church to protect him should he require it. Each congregation is part of a whole. It is not independent.

Each minister and elder is an office bearer for the whole church, as well as for the local church. Hence our system broadens our sympathies. It lifts us out of our localism and attaches us to the Church of Christ as a whole. Our system has also an admirable adaptability to every condition of human society. It tends to bind together the different ranks and orders of society. For in all its courts we may find employer and employed, master and servant, rich and poor sitting on terms of equality. "It is a fair, democratic, representative form of government." It preserves the simplicity and dignity of divine worship, alike in the simplest meeting house, and in the most splendid churches.

Dr. Dods, Professor in Free Church College, Edinburgh, points out two characteristics of Presbyterianism that are fundamental, and which commend our church order. "First—Its adoption of the laity into the government of the church. It does not retain the government of the church in the hands of a hierarchy or priesthood, separated by a great gulf from the laity. It acknowledges and gives its full force to the truth that the people form the church, that the people are the church, and ought to govern and regulate their own affairs." The second feature is, the maintaining of a real and spiritual form of worship instead of a symbolical form, as was the form employed in the temple. Dr. Dods emphasizes this point as one of great importance to the church in this day. "It is a mistake therefore," he adds, "to endeavour, as a large section of our own community is endeavoring, to mix up these two distinct kinds of worship, to revive symbolism, to enlist the services of an army of dresses, priests, and even sacrifices, after He has come, who was the end of symbolism, and brought in the eternal realities. It is the plain unsymbolic simple and free worship of the synagogue, which the apostles adopted

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and maintained, and to this form we must adhere, if we would not compound things that differ, and make a retrogression of two thousand years."

In conclusion, let me call your attention to two other vital points connected with our Presbyterianism ; namely first—It may be, that one reason so little stress is laid in Apostolic teaching, on the subject of church polity is, that our attention might be called more especially to the life of the church. Dr. Dods says, the reason is that the Apostles had no intention to set up a new form of church government. They simply continued the form of government already existing for centuries in the Church of God, as exemplified in the synagogue. Hence they did not need to enlarge on church government, and hence, he maintain, that the Apostles were Presbyterians before they were Christians. But however that may be, the fact I wish to emphasize is—that our church in her best days has always regarded the life of the church as a question of far superior importance to forms and ceremonies. Our church aims at what is vital. Her whole history is a protest against ritualism in worship. Form is important, but where life is, a pure satisfying form will always be found. In this respect our church has an important part to fulfil in this day. And it is well that our young people should know, not only what our forms are, but why we have chosen to retain our simplicity and spirituality of worship, and why we have refused to acknowledge as holy days, days which have been set apart by prelatic churches without any divine authority.

The second point is—to use a favorite word of to-day. Presbyterianism has produced a "type" of Christian character worthy to be preserved. I mean intelligent Presbyterianism, whether in the country or in the city, in former times or in the present. That type of character is marked by an intelligent acquaintance

with the word of God. It has been at all times distinguished also for that sobermindedness, which the Apostle commends to young men. It maintains its hold of the truth, because convinced that the truth rests upon scripture. It is broad minded and robust in its religious life. It desires to be fed with meat and not with milk, or if milk, then with the "sincere milk of the word." As has been well said it does not take to "religious hysteria." It is opposed to mere noise and show in religion. It is not careful to exhibit feeling in public, nor at any time in any loud manner. It believes in a religion which if it does not sing sentimental hymns shows itself in loyalty to conscience, and to Christ, and in steadfast discharge of duty. It is as a rule slow to speak. It is accused of being too silent. I do not agree with this criticism, it always did speak when it had anything to say that should be said. It does not think religious life requires every one to speak in public. I hope the new type which is coming into view will be as strong and enduring, as reliable and intelligent as the older type which is not yet extinct. Let me remind you, that Christian Endeavorism has always been in the church. Endeavorism has only taken a new form. Formerly it was less demonstrative, less self conscious. Formerly it had not a name for itself which it boasted of. It went on without any name higher than duty, and without any notice from the public. It was not marshalled in processions, nor assembled in conventions. It did not distribute banners and badges and ribbons, yet it was there ready to do the work of God. Let us see to it that our new Endeavorism cultivates a type of character as strong and high as that which has been the product of our church in the past. In doing so it will be doing a great work for the country and for religion. For as always, so now, the world requires and christianity demands the very highest type of men and women to carry on the divine crusade in which we are engaged.